

**RELIGION AS AN ASYLUM FOR THE TORTURED: A STUDY OF THE BLACK  
VERNACULAR SERMONIC TRADITION**

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**Abstract**

Blacks, largely from the western coast of Africa were brought as slaves to America where they suffered heavily under the system of slavery. These slaves could be removed from their homeland, but not from God. Basically being a monotheistic community, they craved for God. Therefore, in the new land, they needed religion in some form to garner hope for future. It was then that their slave master's religion, Christianity came with a message of hope and comfort which the blacks easily embraced. Many slaves embraced Christianity because of the sermons of hope brought by black preachers. This paper analyses how religion gradually evolved as an asylum for the body, mind and soul of the slave. It also studies the role of black vernacular (folk) sermons in urging blacks to seek refuge in this asylum.

Keywords: monotheistic community, asylum, refuge.

**Introduction**

African American sermons form an integral part of the vernacular tradition of the blacks in America. This tradition dates back to the Colonial days. Though it is hard to give an exact date for the beginning of black sermons, William H. Pipes affirms that the unique type of black preaching dates back to 1732 (7).

Black sermons were a result of the slaves embracing Christianity in the new land. The blacks could not practise their own native African religion. There was no encouragement around. The slaves were separated from their family members and to add to all these, their slave masters were ruthless. Amidst these circumstances, Christianity came with a message of

hope, in fact, a much wanted hope which the slaves held on to quickly. This paper studies the black vernacular sermonic tradition to understand how this new religion, Christianity, provided asylum to the tortured black slaves of America. For deeper comprehension, an analysis is made of the asylum given by Christianity to the bodies, minds and souls of the slaves.

### **Asylum for the body**

Slave owners, with the passage of time, allowed their slaves to practice their new found religion. Initially, it was supervised, but later the slaves were left on their own. For the slaves, earlier, even Sundays were working days. They laboured from sunrise to even hours after sunset. After embracing Christianity, the slaves were allowed to gather for meetings to listen to sermons and offer prayers, especially on Sundays. This was a welcome break for the tortured bodies of the blacks. They were spared of few hours of labour.

It should be noted that, in such prayer gatherings, initially, the white preachers preached. However, black preachers gradually replaced white preachers and started delivering sermons with a personal touch resulting from their personal experience which was received and reciprocated by the black congregation too. Often while giving a sermon, members in the audience would respond “Help ’em Lord!”, “Well?”, “That’s All Right!”, “Amen!”, “Glory Hallelujah!” etc. The tortured bodies of the slaves had the opportunity to give vent to their emotional jublations and ecstasies, thereby giving a brief respite. Thus, black sermons, to this day, exist as an art form created out of a collective experience.

Black vernacular sermons have in them the characteristics that are native to the African oral tradition. The earliest of folk sermons had a repetitive pattern. Unlike white sermons where the preacher preached and the congregation listened, black sermons called for audience’s participation. Black sermons had patterns of call-and-recall. The preacher would

inspire the audience and encourage them to memorise or repeat verses or statements said by him. It is observed,

“The black preacher presents rhythmically sophisticated statements in which repetitions, dramatic pauses, shifts in tone and pitch, and a variety of other devices associated with black music (and the other arts) are used.”

(Simmons 70)

Thus, black sermons usually unfolded like a drama. Black preachers were often story tellers, singers, actors and activists. Frank Thomas, Director of the Ph.D. Program in African American Preaching and Sacred Rhetoric at Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis observes,

“The preacher, by means of an eyewitness style of picture painting and narration, stirs the senses. As a result, the worshiper does not just hear about John the Baptist in past times; John the Baptist is present in the room, seen, heard, touched and felt by all. The Bible comes alive by an experiential encounter.”

Another interesting aspect of the black sermon was the preacher’s ability to build a suspense, that was held for as long as possible only to be resolved at the end which resulted in unbridled celebration often accompanied by shouts, whoops and praise dance. For the body that was regularly subjected to laborious toils and shackled by the chains of slavery, the religious gathering provided space for shouts, exultations, jumps and excitement. The preachers aroused the curiosity of their listeners and made the whole sermon a memorable occasion of joy and celebration. Sure religion provided a great relief, outburst and an unparalleled refuge for the throbbing bodies of the black slaves.

The black preacher thus called for physical involvement of his listeners while he sermonized. This ultimately led to many preachers serving as the inspiration for organizing protests, rallies, marches, and demonstrations against racism, all of which involved physical

participation. Martin Luther King Jr. was one such Baptist preacher-cum- social activist who mobilised the blacks in protest against racism, segregation, lynching etc. Mark A. Sanders, while quoting James Weldon Johnson's preface to *God's Trombones* states "Black preachers were the first to unify enslaved Africans as a new world people; they were the first to create a free space-the black church-where leadership and mobilization could develop; and it was the black preacher, through his sermons, who "for generations was the mainspring of hope and inspiration for the Negro in America" (102). The black vernacular sermons have, without a doubt, provided occasions of retreat, security, shelter and refuge to the laboured bodies of black slaves, or in other words these sermons have helped blacks find asylum for their bodies.

#### **An Asylum for the mind**

The first group of preachers from amongst the blacks were generally referred to as the slave preachers. They were entrusted with the duty of educating their fellow bondmen to be obedient to their masters and perform the duties of a slave sincerely so that they would be rewarded by God. These preachers, as well as the slaves, were disgusted with listening to the same message of pledging obedience to their masters. Slowly, the blacks started preaching a different sermon, one that carried hope. Passages like the battle of Jericho (The book of Joshua), the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, The struggle and survival of Daniel in Babylon, the victory of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who survived the fiery furnace were often taken as the subject matter for sermons. These were stories of God's children surviving under captivity. Sermons on such subjects were often repeated as they promised of a coming deliverance to the enslaved blacks. The weary mind found refuge in these messages and struggled along in an unfriendly world.

The very sight of a slave preacher encouraged the blacks because he carried a message of hope. While many slaves found bodily refuge by fleeing to the north, many slaves

who still did not or could not flee, craved for at least mental and emotional refuge. Religion brought this refuge in the form of the salve preachers. Slave preachers brought a message that was different from the one their white counterparts brought. The message of the slave preacher made slavery bearable for the slaves. It provided an escape from mental agony and therefore gave strength to tolerate hardships.

The black slave preachers' messages were about God comforting his people. They preached that God too was against slavery and that was why he freed the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt. In the secret gathering of the blacks, slave preachers preached good news. The following lines from a slave preacher's sermon illustrates the point: "...this preacher in chains brought forth the good news to his brothers and sisters: "I tells 'emiffen they keeps praying, the Lord will set 'em free'" (Hopkins 10) In fact slave preachers were an extension of the occultist, the tribal priest or the witch doctor of the ancestral Africa. Blacks were necessarily religious. Back in Africa, people resorted to their religion for solutions to their daily problems. There, they had native priests, extortionist and other spiritual leaders who provided counsels and solutions. In America, the black preacher was the standing figure who was seen as the one with such an anointing. The slaves craved for solace and escape from mental agony. They felt displaced in the real world where they lived and wanted a transcendental escape. This was provided by the slave preacher's message of hope.

Moreover, a religious meeting allowed both blacks and whites to participate side by side and worship one common God. That was a place where blacks felt equal to the whites. There are accounts of slaves telling that they and their master had the same religious experience and thus saw that as one rare occasion when there was no segregation or partiality. Slaves and their masters worshiped alongside each other and had the same experience of salvation

Thus religion itself became a vehicle of hope and escape for the blacks. It allowed them to break free from their restrictions, though for a while, and feel at par with their 'superior' masters. Black preachers were also known for their rhetoric that often gave an emotionally transcendent experience. The listener for a moment forgot his toils and struggles and longed for God. This was seen as the right time to sow the word of God in their hearts so that it would grow and yield fruits. In a world of harsh realities, such temporary escapes were a welcome relief and black vernacular preachers provided it for the slaves. Black preachers considered themselves as God-sent messengers who were responsible for saving the souls of their listeners as well as earthly liberators who had liberate them from the common concerns and problems they faced in daily life.

### **Asylum for the soul**

As much as these preachers orchestrated bodily and mental escapes, so much so did they preach of the soul's escape too. While it is true that when they referred to the devil in their sermons, they indirectly referred to their white masters, it is also equally true that they preached of black escaping the clutches of the devil (Satan) and saving their soul. Black sermons thus provided an allegorical alternative. The institution of slavery served as a useful metaphor in teaching Biblical truths. The slaves who struggled under servitude and longed for respite, were reminded that they also had to escape hell by renouncing sin. Under slavery, their bodies suffered tortures, which would one day end. But in hell their souls would suffer for everlasting days. The vernacular sermons persuaded the blacks to value their souls and thereby strive to escape hell fire too. While they longed to be freed from the control of white masters, they were encouraged to free themselves from the hold of the devil too. While the slaves loathed and hated their earthly masters, they were promised of serving a loving and concerned masters (meaning God) if they get saved. Their sermons were interspersed with songs like this one,

“My knee bones am aching,  
My body’s rackin’ with pain  
I ‘lieve I’m a chile of God,  
And this ain’t my home,  
‘Cause Heaven’s my aim” (Baer and Singer 248)

Through their earthly toils, they learned to sing of a land that had no pains or sorrows and to get there they were taught to be freed from the real bondage, that is, sin. This message of salvation soothed the souls of the blacks. They found a new deliverer in God who would save them from sin. Black vernacular sermons sowed this thought of spiritual liberation that the slaves were asked to seek. Maria W. Stewart, a black nationalist, in a sermon delivered on September 21, 1833, beautifully explains the turmoil of her soul and the escape she had. She says,

“Borne down with a heavy load of sin and shame, my conscience filled with remorse... I was at last brought to accept salvation as a free gift, in and through the merits of a crucified Redeemer... Then was I glad when I realized the dangers I had escaped; and then I consecrated my soul and body...” (209)

In this message, Stewart further goes on to explain the conflict a sinner confronts and the joy and satisfaction he draws at the end when he gets saved. The message of salvation was a welcome break for toiling slaves and a much needed alternative to slavery. James Weldon Johnson in his collection of 7 Negro sermons gives the following excerpt from a sermon delivered by a preacher

“ Young man, come away from Babylon,  
That hell-border city of Babylon.

Leave the dancing and gambling of Babylon,  
The wine and whiskey of Babylon,

The hot-mouthed women of Babylon;

Fall down on your knees,

And say in your heart:

I will arise and go to my Father.” (25)

This is with reference to the parable of the prodigal son told by Jesus. The Bible says that the younger son of a father went to a distant land leaving his father and spent his fortune only to be degraded to the level of eating what the swine would eat. The Bible does not name the country he left for, but the black preacher, known for his imagination and spontaneity, names it as Babylon which the Bible states as an evil city. Revelations 17: 5 reads “And upon her forehead was a name written, Mystery, Babylon The Great, The Mother Of Harlots And Abominations Of The Earth.” (KJV). Here the preacher admonishes all sinners to escape hell fire and save their souls by returning to their father, i.e. God.

Not only was salvation preached as the way of soul’s escape for the blacks, it was also confessed as the personal experience of the preacher himself. Black preachers created the desire to get saved by narrating their own experience of salvation. While escaping slavery involved a lot of risks, and needed much planning and perseverance, salvation was free for them to receive when they renounce sin. It was simple yet important and glorious. It was not new for the blacks to listen to their preachers explain of the joy that filled their soul when they got saved. Though slaves in this world, they felt free in the spirit after this experience. Therefore, it is not unusual for a black preacher to keep salvation as the topic of his final sermon before dying. For instance, Ralph Hardee Rives in his essay on Henry Evans, who pioneered Methodism in Fayetteville, North Carolina, quotes him as saying:

“I have come to say my last word to you. It is this: None but Christ...if in my last hour I could trust to that , or anything but Christ crucified, for my salvation, all should be lost and my soul perish forever.” (NCpedia)



It is clear that the Bible appealed to the blacks in manifold ways. It taught them that in God's sight, all were equal. The Bible confirmed that God loathed slavery; God was by the side of the oppressed and God himself was a liberator. Since he liberated the Israelites from slavery in Egypt they looked up to him to liberate them also from slavery. Moreover, God was seen as the only one who could liberate their souls. As much as physical escape was plotted, so much so was salvation encouraged as a means of one's soul's escape from hell and judgement. The black preachers wooed and convinced their listeners to accept this message of salvation by talking from their own experience and from the Bible.

### **Conclusion**

On analysing the role of black vernacular sermons in providing asylum to the body, mind and soul of the black slave, one understands that sermons had appealed to them in several ways. The same sermon would have provided a welcome break and a timely refuge to the bodies of many slaves, while providing relief to the minds of others. It could also be noted that the refuge offered for the soul seems to have had a lasting effect on the black slave community. Together, hand in hand, they had gained strength to struggle along in this merciless world to find freedom for their souls, instead of just fleeing from their slave masters. The familiarity with the system of slavery had made them yearn for a spiritual liberation. On the whole, it could be said that religion has provided an asylum for the tortured black slaves of America.

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